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## The Search for a New England Character: Change, the Town, and the Wilderness in Timothy Dwight's "Travels in New England and New York"

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**The Search for a New England Character: Change, The Town, and the  
Wilderness in Timothy Dwight's Travels in New England and New York**

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**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

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## APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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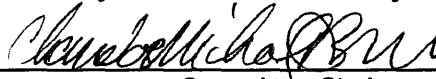
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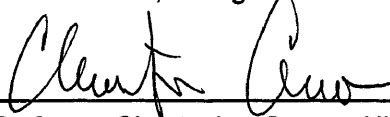
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## ABSTRACT PAGE

At first glance, Timothy Dwight, descendent of Solomon Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards, wrote verbose theological treatises, gave moralizing sermons, and tightened discipline at Yale. His posthumously published *Travels in New England and New York* chronicle the changes taking place at the turn of the 19th century. The traditional means of forming character was crumbling, and proving inadequate to create both the visible saint and the good republican citizen who could exist in this rapidly changing world. In the process of observing this change, Dwight attempts to find glimmers of hope for positive transformation and practical solutions to curtail the worst of the damage.

In the *Travels* Dwight moves beyond the traditional space of the town to the wilderness and the lives of Indians in search of how to define and control this change. Although the town was perfect for restricting men's passions, in an age more concerned with forming than restricting, the town fell short. Moreover, the changes occurring in New England bode ill for the survival of the town system. Dwight makes the case that a number of factors, environment, society, temperament, and divine ordinance, go into the development of character. If the town system is doomed to destruction and cannot create the ideal republican citizen, then, ultimately, keeping America from the decadence of Europe rests with the ability of the regenerate man to see and understand the wilderness as God meant it to be understood.

Unable to fully articulate a new paradigm, the only solution Dwight can advocate involves reenergizing those institutions that New England is famous for. Ultimately, Dwight gives up on the question of individual identity, at least in the *Travels*. His longings for romantic freedom, for himself and New England, are impossible within the bounds of a universe constrained either by heredity or environment. The solution lies, as it always did, in the transformative power of God's grace. Only in that way can town and the wilderness be properly understood and used, and only with that is the only way that Americans create a republic that resists European decadence and that can adapt to change without collapsing into degeneracy.

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## Acknowledgments

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At first glance, Timothy Dwight appears the very epitome of stodgy Puritan cleric. His poor eyesight makes characterizations of him as near-sighted and myopic seem especially apt.<sup>1</sup> A descendent of Solomon Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards, he wrote verbose theological treatises, gave moralizing sermons, and tightened discipline at Yale. His four volume travel narrative begins with the disclaimer that the trips were not taken for pleasure, but in consideration of his fragile health, which denied him the ability to study all day. Yet, a careful reading of *Travels in New England and New York* belies this figure of Dwight as a latter day Puritan bitterly lamenting man's depravity and decrying the modern world.<sup>2</sup> The *Travels* are certainly concerned with change, and the passing of a way of life. If New England was changing then so would the New Englander. Moreover, the traditional means of creating people were crumbling, and proving inadequate to create both the visible saint and the good republican citizen who could exist in this rapidly changing world. In the process of observing this change,

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<sup>1</sup> By the time of Dwight's travels his eyes were ruined, he could only read or write for a few hours a day. In early biographies this is explained by a tendency when he was young to read beyond the point of health. It is likely that Dwight had myopia and suffered from ocular migraines. See, John R. Fitzmier, *New England's Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. 9

<sup>2</sup> The *Travels* received the most critical attention after Barbara Solomon published a new edition in 1969. Much of the scholarship has been focused on landscape and its connection to aesthetic theories. See, for instance. Vincent Freimarck, "Timothy Dwight's Brief Lives in *Travels in New England and New York*," *Early American Literature* (1973) 44-58; John F. Sears "Timothy Dwight and the American Landscape: The Composing Eye in Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York*." *Early American Literature* 11.3 (1976): 311-321; Peter M. Briggs Timothy Dwight 'Composes' a Landscape for New England *American Quarterly* 40: 3 (Sep., 1988) 359-377; Timothy B. Spears "Common Observations: Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York*." *American Studies* 30.1 (1989): 35-52; Jane Kamensky, "In These Contrasted Climes, How Chang'd the Scene': Progress, Declension, and Balance in the Landscapes of Timothy Dwight" *New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters*, 63:1 (1990 Mar), pp. 80-108. All these work make the point that landscape is not merely observed, but constructed, and in so doing, Dwight aimed at social and cultural control.

Dwight attempts to find glimmers of hope for positive transformation and practical solutions to curtail the worst of the damage.

In the *Travels* Dwight moves beyond the traditional space of the town to the wilderness and the lives of Indians in search of how to define and control this change. Although the town was perfect for restricting men's passions, in an age more concerned with forming than restricting, the town fell short. Moreover, the changes occurring in New England bode ill for the survival of the town system. Dwight made the case that a number of factors go into the development of character. Environment, society, natural temperament, and divine ordinance all work on people. If the town system is doomed to destruction and cannot create the ideal republican citizen, then, ultimately, keeping America from the decadence of Europe rests with the ability of the regenerate man to see and understand the wilderness as God meant it to be understood.

Dwight, born in 1752, was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards on his mother's side, and the inheritor of a long line of prominent citizens on his father's. His precocious feats of learning at an early age led to matriculation at Yale at thirteen. After graduating and becoming ordained, he served as a chaplain during the Revolutionary war. He then held the position of minister at Greenfield Hill and established Greenfield Academy where he experimented with female education and non-corporal discipline. In 1795 he was elected president of Yale College and served as professor of theology.<sup>3</sup> It was here

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<sup>3</sup> The earliest biographies of Dwight are the "Biographical Hints" composed by his son Benjamin. They are of little critical value. The authoritative biography of Dwight is Charles E. Cunningham *Timothy*



that his influence made a lasting impression. He lobbied for funding, reformed and modernized Yale's curriculum by adding science and literature to the classics, and changed the culture of the college, setting it on the path of becoming a major university.<sup>4</sup> His major poetry, *The Conquest of Canaan*, *Greenfield Hill*, and *The Triumph of Infidelity*, though not regarded as brilliant, is nevertheless important in the literature of the early Republic.<sup>5</sup> His *Theology, Explained and Defended*, lacking any stylistic or theological innovation, has been relegated to obscurity.<sup>6</sup>

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*Dwight, 1752-1817, a Biography* New York: Macmillan, 1942. Though excessively panegyric, Cunningham offers the most detailed narrative of Dwight's life. Kenneth Silverman's *Timothy Dwight* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969, provides a biography of narrower focus that centers on Dwight's literary career. The most recent biography is John R. Fitzmier, *New England's Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817*, 1998th ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. All the biographies describe a close-minded man, trapped in a lost past, who in vain defended federalism, Puritanism, and the social order.

<sup>4</sup> For Dwight's influence on Yale, see Brooks Mathers Kelley *Yale: A History* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, Chapter 9 "College Becomes University". Kelley is skeptical of the claims that Dwight created the new "parental" mode of discipline and supervision, and also disputes the idea that Dwight reformed the curriculum. Rather he suggests that these developments were part of a long progression of change. Still, Dwight was popular among the students and held a reputation of being a caring and paternal disciplinarian while holding Yale students to a stricter standard of morality than his predecessors. Dwight's ability to gain a following as a teacher while still espousing conservative views can be seen in the popularity of his "Decisions" in which he publicly debated students on a variety of topics. See Abe C. Ravitz "Timothy Dwight's Decisions" *The New England Quarterly* 31:4 (December 1958) 514-519. Kelley does credit Dwight with great administrative gifts, especially his selection and support of faculty, such as Benjamin Silliman. See Chandos Michael Brown *Benjamin Silliman: A Life in the Young Republic* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Scholars first noted Dwight's literary contributions as part of the Connecticut wits. See Vernon Parrington *The Connecticut Wits* ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926 and Leon Howard *The Connecticut Wits* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1943. Howard is sympathetic to Dwight although he acknowledges his work was not imaginative or stylistically successful. Parrington harshly criticizes Dwight for his conservatism. Kenneth Silverman's biography describes Dwight's literary output as revealing a man capable of thinking of America only as verging upon the Kingdom of God or a doomsday. More sympathetic to Dwight is William C. Dowling *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990. Dowling suggests that Dwight successfully used his poetry as a political device for social criticism. Chapter 2 of Emory Elliott's *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic 1725-1810* New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, suggests that Dwight was not as backward looking as he seemed and that his writing changed with America's changing circumstances. Though critical, he held out hope for the future. Another reassessment of Dwight's literary contributions can be found in Collin Wells *The Devil and Doctor Dwight: Satire and Theology in the Early*

Dwight compiled the *Travels* from notes taken on journeys from 1796 to 1815, using amanuenses to transcribe his dictation for the manuscript.<sup>7</sup> Acting on a deathbed request to Benjamin Silliman, his son edited and published them posthumously in 1821. Dwight's intentions were to describe what he thought was "a novelty in the history of man. The colonization of a wilderness by civilized men, where a regular government, mild manners, arts, learning, science, and Christianity have been interwoven in its progress from the beginning, is a state of things, of which the eastern continent, and the records of past ages, furnish neither an example nor a resemblance."<sup>8</sup> The *Travels* are therefore in Dwight's mind not a random collection of observations, but a narrative describing a triumphant settlement of the wilderness. According to Dwight the most important thing about this settlement, besides its historical novelty, is that "this state of things presents one interesting feature in the human character; or that it exhibits man in one advantageous attitude, and his efforts in a light, which is honourable to our nature."<sup>9</sup> While the title suggests a story about a region, Dwight suggests that he means to discuss human character in the process of settlement. Despite the triumphant tones of this

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*American Public* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. Wells expands on Dowling and explores the *The Triumph of Infidelity* as revealing ideological battles between political parties, religious sects, and intellectual traditions.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Berk's *Calvinism versus Democracy: Timothy Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy* Camden, Conn: Archon, 1974 explores the impact Dwight had on American religion, the obscurity of his *Theology* notwithstanding.

<sup>7</sup> The method of the creation of the *Travels* helps to explain their repetitive style.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Dwight *Travels in New England and New York* ed. Barbara Miller Solomon. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1969. vol I:xii

<sup>9</sup> Dwight I:xii

introduction, the promise of the progress of civilization, and the advantage to man's character, is waning before Dwight's eyes.

Dwight's eyes are crucial to understanding the *Travels*. Poor as it may be, Dwight's sight is not only special because he is an American. He is saved, which means that he is essentially different from the unsaved. Visible saints have "new hearts, and new eyes, new tongues, new hands, new feet."<sup>10</sup> This state of being affects all of his senses. Jonathan Edwards explains that "If there is a book which God is the author of, it is most reasonable to suppose that the distinguishing glories of his word are of such a kind, as that the sin and corruptions of men's hearts which above all things alienates men from the deity...would blind men from discerning the beauties of such a book."<sup>11</sup> The unregenerate man traveling through New England will necessarily perceive it differently than Dwight does. Just as the natural man cannot understand the full meaning of the Bible, the Book of Nature is likewise obscure. When an unregenerate person sees, "and prevalence of corruption obscures the object, so it enfeebles the sight; it darkens the sight to all spiritual objects."<sup>12</sup> The objects of New England are spiritual objects. The *Travels* then is in some sense an act of translation, Dwight uses secular language to describe his spiritual meaning. New England is a symbolic and sacred space.<sup>13</sup> Good towns create

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* Bedford: Applewood Books, 2009 originally published 1746, 424.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, 330.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards 220

<sup>13</sup> For an exploration of the way that sacred space existed for the Puritans and its meaning, see Sacvan Berkovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

visible saints while the wilderness is the home of natural man. Dwight addresses both the spiritual and secular needs of New England.

The search for a way to create the model Republican citizen was of course a widespread project because it was so central to the creation of America from the colonies and for the perpetuation of America as a nation. As Crèvecoeur famously put the question: "What then is the American, this new man?"<sup>14</sup> The answer is "*He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds."<sup>15</sup> The answer only creates more questions: what kinds of manners, what way of life, what sort of government, what rank? Everyone who considered the future of the republic had to address this question and contended the answers heatedly. I focus on Dwight as an example of this search because of the tensions that exist in the *Travels* as he attempts to answer these questions that are not present in his political writings.

### *I: The Changing Times*

Dwight wrote the *Travels* in response to change and he spends much of his narrative describing that change. Like his Puritan forefathers, Dwight watched the chance to attain the kingdom of God fade before his eyes. The original Puritan

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<sup>14</sup> J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, reprinted from the original ed., with a prefatory note by W. P. Trent and an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn. New York: Fox, Duffield, 1904, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Crèvecoeur, 54

experiment had broken under the weight of the reality of depraved human nature.<sup>16</sup> Instead of raising successive generations of visible saints, they were driven to adopt the Halfway Covenant as an emergency measure. The revolution to Dwight was an obvious second chance for perfection.<sup>17</sup> In his early poetry, Dwight attempted to connect the biblical narrative of a people finding their place in the wilderness and the seventeenth-century Puritan experience to the Revolution. However, that rhetoric no longer properly described the world, where the greatest threat was now not the howling wilderness, but the city. Having fled from Europe, Americans now risked mimicking the

Despite his fear of change, Dwight adopts a rhetoric that embraces progress and improvement.

Indeed, Dwight's most common lament was that towns stopped progressing, let themselves go from "a want of energy; a destitution of all views and efforts towards improvement; a sluggish acquiescence in inconveniences and imperfections."<sup>18</sup> The character of the townspeople likewise stopped progressing "Their products their houses, their manners and their enjoyments are much the same as they were fifty years ago, and as they probably will be fifty years to come."<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, too rapid progress had its effects on landscape and people as well. William Cronon details the changes in the

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Bushman *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut 1690-1765* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.

<sup>17</sup> Many commentators have noted Dwight's tendency toward a cyclical and Manichean conception of history. Everything is either a birthday or a doomsday. Kenneth Silverman expresses this understanding of Dwight most coherently. In this light, Dwight considered the Revolution a birthday, the start of millennial progress.

<sup>18</sup> Dwight III:21

<sup>19</sup> Dwight III:21

land that Dwight regrets. Deforestation, ill-used farmland, unsightly buildings, and hastily constructed edifices all distressed Dwight.<sup>20</sup>

By the time of the composition of the *Travels*, it was obvious to even the most stubborn advocates of the Revolution that the transformation of America was not going to be an easy path to perfection. Instead of Connecticut's system spreading across the country, Connecticut itself began to change. Dwight saw cities grow larger, aristocracy weaken, and mobocracy threaten from all quarters. Timothy Dwight's Federalist vision was dying. The election of 1800, followed by the war of 1812 and the Hartford Convention, sounded the death knell for Federalism, even in the Federalist stronghold of Connecticut. American was changing, to be sure, but not in the way that Dwight had imagined. Some of Dwight's contemporaries like Noah Webster, Charles Brockden Brown and Joel Barlow, responded with bitterness towards the Revolution's failure to inspire art and learning in America.<sup>21</sup> Dwight himself lamented the government's disinclination to sponsor science and the arts, but refused to become completely disaffected.<sup>22</sup>

Most disturbing to Dwight, the idea of the self changed. The traditional means of social control, aimed at creating and controlling the ideal New Englander, no longer

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<sup>20</sup> See, William Cronon *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* New York: Hill and Wang, 1983 for the kinds of ecological changes that occurred after the founding of New England. Dwight's concerns about deforestation appear on 112-114, and his observations of unsustainable and wasteful agricultural practices leading to soil exhaustion appear on 152-153.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob *Telling the Truth about History* New York: Norton and Co., 1994, 98.

<sup>22</sup> Elliott 58

functioned. They could not provide the sort of citizen required in the new Republic.<sup>23</sup> In *Prodigals and Pilgrims* Jay Fliegelman describes the new order as one in which “no longer was the fundamental responsibility of parents to restrain their children and render their fallen nature obedient to external authority...Instead, parents must by their example and instruction seek to control those earliest impressions and influences that form a child’s mind and character.”<sup>24</sup> Restraining the passions and resisting the wilderness is less important in the new Republic than education. Instead of opposing this shift, the late Dwight of the *Travels* acknowledges it, and puts less emphasis on restraint, and more on formation.

Dwight was specifically concerned, as all Congregationalist theologians were, with controlling the passions and converting people to visible saints. Human beings are fallen and depraved so it is no real surprise that they are led astray by powerful emotions. Yet it is essential to be able to control these passions, as doing so is a means to grace. The time honored Puritan solution to this was an assertion of institutional control through the church and state. If different climates and living situations could change complexions, they could also alter the chances of conversion.

While an earlier generation strove to convince themselves and others that their English character and cultural heritage could be held intact in this New England, Dwight

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<sup>23</sup> These means were outmoded well before the Revolution. For a detailed explanation of how the puritan social order collapsed, see Bushman *From Puritan to Yankee*.

<sup>24</sup> Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority 1750-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) 2.

uses the same rhetoric for a countervailing purpose. He argues that the American citizenry emerges from a specific environment that has imbued them with qualities superior to those created by the old country. This desire, of course, is not without ambivalence and fear over the power of environment. After the immediate struggle with the wilderness had ended in Dwight's Connecticut, and the town safely guarded against the howling beasts he was left to wonder, "if the wilderness, vanquished on the objective level, had not simply retreated to the subjective—to take root in the supposed victors' minds, where it could continue the fight in the inner wilderness of human nature."<sup>25</sup> The permeable barrier between the objective external and the subjective internal structured Dwight's entire search for solutions to the problem of change.

The question is what kinds of influences affect people. Aside from the God and the institutions of the town, what other forces shape identity? Samuel Stanhope Smith's *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, first published in 1787, and revised in 1810, provides background for Dwight's understanding of how the environment can affect the individual. Stanhope Smith argues that the "the fineness of texture, and delicacy of organization of the human constitution, renders it extremely susceptible of the impressions of climate, as well as of all other causes which

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<sup>25</sup> John Canup. *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of an American Identity in Colonial New England*. 1st ed. Wesleyan, 1990, 28.



act upon the animal frame.”<sup>26</sup> The Bible and the monogenists are correct; the different races are in fact one species. This should not be taken as a precursor to evolutionary theory. In this paradigm, man is unique in his adaptability, unlike any other animal. Furthermore, the changes in appearance are not adaptive, but rather the effects of climate and society upon physiology, which after humans spread out over the globe, became more or less fixed.

Since Dwight was not writing specifically on the origins and adaptability of mankind, his theories are not as clear as Smith’s. Moreover, the rest of the text often complicates what he does state explicitly. He alters, modifies, or even completely refutes environmentalism according to his needs in defending New England.<sup>27</sup> However, the nuanced environmentalism that Smith espouses is key to understanding the background to Dwight’s thought.

Dwight uses the story of Henry Moss as an example of the profound effects that environment can have on people. Moss was a black man, who began to turn white in spots. The stories that Dwight hears about whitening, as well as his own personal inspection of Henry Moss leads him to the conclusion that “the external appearances of the complexion and hair on the human body are not original, nor at all essential to the

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Stanhope Smith. *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*. New Brunswick: J. Simpson and Co., 1810, 10.

<sup>27</sup> By environmentalism I am referring to a theory based in Enlightenment philosophy suggesting that humanity was universal and any differences were the effect of physical, cultural, and social factors which could cause superficial changes and differences.

nature of the body. All these men continued in every other particular the same in body and mind, while they were yet entirely changed in complexion to a considerable extent.”<sup>28</sup> Dwight treats complexion as “not essential, but incidental; not original, but superinduced upon the human constitution.”<sup>29</sup> Indians are not a different species, just changed by their environment. Essential constitution and human nature was the same for all, white, black and Indian. Yet, difference in skin color was not meaningless. It signaled other affects of environment. Black men grew whiter as a result of their contact with white civilization, which also improved their characters. Looking at American slaves, Smith notes that those who live closest to their masters and work as house servants, have the most refined complexions, “A fact which seems strongly to indicate that this variety of the human countenance does not depend merely on the influence of the climate, but is connected also, in some measure, with the manner of living, and habits of the people.”<sup>30</sup> Dwight also comments that because of the salubrious climate, and contact with civilization, blacks in America grew lighter by the day. There was a definite correlation, however complex, between appearance, climate, manner of living, and character.

This correlation made the kind of environment in which a person grows up a crucial concern. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, an increasingly urban and mobile population made identity fluid. Character, forged in the ideal town, was now in jeopardy. Cities like

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<sup>28</sup> Dwight III:128

<sup>29</sup> Dwight III:128

<sup>30</sup> Smith 113.

Boston and New York with their rapidly shifting demographics, could not sustain stable character development. Without constant social pressure, and the supervision of church, family, and school, people might not form the proper motives and restraints of action. Infidelity, greed, rebelliousness and all manner of concupiscence were sure to result. Dwight was not the only one concerned about this development. As Karen Halttunen describes it, “By the mid-eighteenth century in New England population growth and geographic mobility were making official surveillance of strangers increasingly difficult and by the early nineteenth century, an urban explosion was vast numbers of Americans into what urban sociologist Lyn Lofland has called the ‘world of strangers,’ where inhabitants know nothing of the majority of their fellow residents.”<sup>31</sup> Even people in small towns gave in to the desire “To be like the inhabitants of great cities” and so began to “resemble them in show. This spirit displays itself in dress, buildings, furniture, and modes of living; and is often the gulf which swallows up the property and ruins the family.”<sup>32</sup> By parodying the ways of the cities, they fall into the immorality that the city represents. This is especially harmful to children brought up in these circumstances who “soon learn, that the primary end of their efforts, and even of their existence, is appearance only. What they are, they soon discern is of little consequence; but what they appear to be, is of importance inestimable. The whole force of the early mind is directed, therefore, to this object; and exhausted in acquiring the

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<sup>31</sup> Karen Halttunen *Confidence Men and Painted Women* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Dwight IV:4-5

trifles, of which it is composed.”<sup>33</sup> Dwight feared for the future of a nation whose citizens were educated in such a school of vice, which could only produce people who were dangerous “because of their social formlessness, their liminality.”<sup>34</sup> Small towns made sure that character could not be counterfeited, that others could not be fooled by mere appearances, but hope for the success of the small town system was rapidly fading.

Dwight’s fears about the influence of cities on identity were not hysterical speculation and morbid prognostication. Dwight was fighting a losing battle against another discourse of Americanism. The new American was no longer the Puritan saint but, “In the nineteenth century, the raw country youth entering the city to seek his fortune was coming to symbolize the American-on-the make.”<sup>35</sup> The importance of appearance and lack of depth that Dwight despises emerged in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* as the quintessential qualities of the American. In Franklin’s America, looking industrious, by dressing well and being seen bustling around town on business and never being caught loafing, is as important as being industrious, since looking successful meant gaining trust and business. The anonymity of the city, in Franklin’s account, is full of promise, a new beginning.

Improvement was good, it is the central theme of the *Travels*, but it was the speed and direction of change represented by the city that Dwight feared most. New York,

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<sup>33</sup> Dwight I:371

<sup>34</sup> Halttunen, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Halttunen, 3.

although it displays the harmful luxuries, entertainments, and frivolities of most cities, gets a decent review from Dwight because he is not insensible to the fact that improvement means growth. At the moment that Dwight visits, he sees that most of the inhabitants are from New England, and most are extremely talented people who have gone to the city for the opportunity it provides. The immigrants can be controlled because they are a minority. While he cannot ascertain a general character because of the diversity of the population, he notes that the people seem industrious. The commercial traffic through New York suggests that their efforts are being rewarded. As the “market town for the whole American coast,” New York will understandably grow and prosper. However, it can only maintain itself only so long as most of its residents grew up in New England towns, the leadership of the city remains restricted to well bred and well educated elite, and the police force is granted broad powers.<sup>36</sup> However, Dwight sees in Boston that these controls are difficult to establish and maintain. As Jane Kamensky points out “Dwight’s discomfort in the cityscape was so marked that some commercial centers impressed him merely because they managed to exceed his low expectations.”<sup>37</sup> The cities were surely on a precarious path.

Much of the *Travels* documents the extent to which life in Connecticut and New England had degenerated in Dwight’s eyes. He concentrates on a number of concerns.

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<sup>36</sup> Dwight III:327

<sup>37</sup> Jane Kamensky. “In These Contrasted Climes, How Chang’d the Scene’: Progress, Declension, and Balance in the Landscapes of Timothy Dwight” *New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters*, 63:1 (Mar 1990), pp. 80-108.100

First, the presence of demagoguery and mobocracy is a constant threat. For Dwight, the inevitable endpoint of popular democracy is an uprising like the French Revolution, or Shay's Rebellion closer to home, the antithesis to everything Dwight and the Federalists stood for. Any system that would allow the fickle will of the people to dominate is fatally flawed. The misrule of the people is especially likely in places with a "population gathered from many different countries...without attachment to each other, to the place, or to the government."<sup>38</sup> In other words, a city. Cities are especially prone to demagoguery; a word Dwight considers almost as severe an indictment as "infidel". Demagogues are men without principle "who feel, that every change from good order and established society will be beneficial to themselves; who have nothing to lose, and therefore expect to be gainers by every scramble."<sup>39</sup> Ethan Allen, numerous minor politicians, and some ministers, in particular Samuel Ely, draw Dwight's condemnation as demagogues. He admits that there is no real way to repress demagoguery in a free society. The only thing that can be hoped for is that the citizens have enough character to resist their malevolent charms. Again, this is easier in small close-knit communities.

A second, but related, issue was religious enthusiasm. While Dwight supported religious awakenings to the extent that they reinvigorated piety, he disdained the antinomian tendencies of religious enthusiasm. The Shakers, on whom Dwight spends two entire letters, take religious enthusiasm to such an extreme that they appear to suffer

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<sup>38</sup> Dwight III:333

<sup>39</sup> Dwight II:323

from a “violent disease”.<sup>40</sup> Dwight brags that during the latest religious revival in New England, there was very little evidence of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, in 1808, Dwight almost lost a student to religious despair. Such a close call, especially in the closely monitored environment of Yale, confirmed the severity of the threat of religious enthusiasm.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, new economic structures threatened Dwight. His world depended on industry of course, but the new capitalism he sees around him distresses him. New settlements based on trade offended Dwight. The “bold spirit of commercial adventure” that these towns have is ruinous to them and their inhabitants since they lack in prudence, experience, and education.”<sup>42</sup> Any sort of wandering trade upsets Dwight. The men who sale tin wares door to door

part, at an early period with both modesty, and principle. Their sobriety is exchanged for cunning; their honesty for imposition; and their decent behaviour for coarse impudence. Mere wanderers, accustomed to no order, control, or warship; and directed solely to the acquisition of petty gains; they soon fasten upon this object; and forget every other, of a superiour nature. The only source of their pleasure, or their reputation, is gain.<sup>43</sup>

This type of capitalism disturbed the order because it encouraged movement. People who did not have their identity tied to a town were like people who lived in cities. Their identities were fluid and anonymous. The rapid expansion of capitalism, and the

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<sup>40</sup> Dwight III:108

<sup>41</sup> See Steven J. Novak *The Rights of Youth: American Colleges and Student Revolt, 1798-1815* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, 134-137.

<sup>42</sup> IV 4

<sup>43</sup> Dwight II:34

values it required presented “the possibility of a recognizably “liberal” or “modern” self, one defined primarily by the exercise of individual choice in an expanding marketplace of ideas and goods.”<sup>44</sup> Dwight instead holds to an alternative model of a moral economy.<sup>45</sup> Capitalism holds the potential to be both geographically and morally destabilizing. Analyzing Dwight’s poetry in the context of literature in the new Republic, Emory Elliott observes that “although there are signs in his writing that he might have privately questioned whether the emergent capitalist-Christian ideology that his works promoted was really the best foundation for the new nation, his urgent need to create for himself a leadership role in the republic prevented him from pursuing such doubts very far or from exploring them in his art.”<sup>46</sup> In the *Travels* Dwight recognizes the changes requiring a new sort of person, but resists the American identity proposed by Franklin.

The line between industry and greed is perilously thin, as is the line between leadership and demagoguery, democracy and mobocracy, religious piety and enthusiasm. Confronted with such evidence of change, Dwight looks to New England’s strengths—the town, the wilderness, and the Indians—to find a way to deal with it.

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<sup>44</sup> T. H. Breen, Timothy Hall “Structuring Provincial Imagination: The Rhetoric and Experience of Social Change in Eighteenth-Century New England” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 5 (Dec., 1998), pp. 1411-1439. 1413

<sup>45</sup> I follow E.P. Thompson “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” *Past & Present* 50 (Feb, 1971) 76-136, in defining the moral economy as “a consistent social view of traditional norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community.”(79). See also, Thomas Clay Aronold “Rethinking Moral Economy” *The American Political Science Review* 95:1 (Mar, 2001) 85-95.

<sup>46</sup> Emory Elliott *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1810* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 59.



## *II: The Town*

The town is the structure that for Dwight defines New England that differentiates it from Europe and the rest of the country. As Richard Bushman points out “The town was recognized as the proper matrix within which government could function to control each individual.”<sup>47</sup> The town both modeled the ideal balance and acted upon the individual to produce the correct character. Towns are permeable, with influences coming and going, but the boundaries are set. They hold civilization against wilderness. The towns “originated a variety of blessings, without which life, even in the most desirable climate, is to a great extent destitute both of usefulness and enjoyment.”<sup>48</sup> Dwight is careful to describe all the public institutions in the towns he visits and focuses on the means of control: churches, schools, poor houses, and prisons. While churches and schools indicate the healthy functioning of town society, poor houses and prisons, especially large ones in constant use, are signs of degeneration. While this degeneration sometimes occurs within the town, it is much more likely in the city or the country. The town system is in some ways for Dwight the only option. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is becoming a more and more untenable option. Moreover, even in its ideal form, Dwight

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<sup>47</sup> Bushman, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Dwight I:245-246

begins to recognize its weaknesses and limitations. The limits of the towns produced limited minds.

Dwight argues that the “mode of settling in villages resulted partly from the original habits of the New-England colonists, and partly from the danger with which they were threatened by the surrounding savages.”<sup>49</sup> Both these circumstances had evaporated for Dwight. The original English habit had disappeared as the colonists became “American.” The salubrious threat from the howling wilderness that helped to structure institutions and identity had evaporated along with the Puritan errand into the wilderness. Important older towns were growing into cities, and new settlements were not towns as Dwight understood them.

In Dwight’s view, this problem applied equally to identity. When identity is boundless it is threatening, and therefore must be constrained and circumscribed within institutions so that it appropriately resembles all other units of identity. The town, because of its permanence and face to face interaction, forces the creation of self-restraint, which creates the modern self. Without appropriate constraints, the person could easily fall into sin. The town provided a way to create weaned affections. It structured the means of grace—going to church, reading the Bible, praying, reflecting, behaving properly—that Dwight viewed so pragmatically.

For the foreigners among his readers, Dwight helpfully defines what he means by town:

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<sup>49</sup> Dwight I:245-246

It will be necessary, perhaps, to explain to you the manner in which I use these terms. A town, in the language of New-England, denotes a collection of houses in the first parish, if the township contains more than one, constituting the principal, and ordinarily the original settlement in that parish. A street is the way in which such a collection of houses is built, but does not at all include the fact that the way is paved; whether paved or not, it is equally named a street. Nor is it intended that the houses are contiguous, or even very near to each other. A great part of the streets in New-England, exclusively of the paths which run through them, are, during the pleasant season, equally verdant with the neighbouring fields. Town is also used sometimes to denote a township, but it will not be used in this manner in these Letters. In legal language it intends the inhabitants of a township assembled in lawful town meeting.<sup>50</sup>

Dwight makes several important distinctions in this definition. First, a town is not a township. It is more than a legally designated administrative space. Rather, it is a space that was the first and most important settlement in a parish. This sort of organization is particular to New England, which was “colonized in a manner widely different from that which prevailed in the other British colonies. All the ancient, and a great part of the modern townships, were settled in what may be called the village manner.”<sup>51</sup> Other inferior parts of the country settled in an incoherent fashion “each placing his house where his own convenience dictated.”<sup>52</sup> The forms of settlement favored by the other colonies, like the sprawling southern system, create men with “intelligence bounded by the farm, the market, and the road which leads to it.”<sup>53</sup> Such a limited mind could never function as a useful citizen of the Republic. Not only were New Englanders by character and constitution, predisposed to this manner of

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<sup>50</sup> Dwight I:156

<sup>51</sup> Dwight I:244

<sup>52</sup> Dwight I:244

<sup>53</sup> Dwight I:245

organization, but the town itself shaped them in return. The method of the other colonies, scattered farms and plantations planned at whim and convenience, can only create subpar citizens because the “state of the manners, and that of the mind, are mutually causes and effects. The mind, like the manners, will be distant, rough, forbidding, gross, solitary, and universally disagreeable. A nation, planted in this manner, can scarcely be more than half civilized; and to refinement of character and life must necessarily be a stranger.”<sup>54</sup> So, the way that people live affected their minds, and their minds affected the way in which they lived. The type of society that uses any method of organization other than the town will eventually collapse because the kinds of people it creates will barely be recognizable as people. It will not be able to hold itself together as an entity.

The town holds consistent in the face of the changing environment. It makes its inhabitants immune to any deleterious influences. In this way, “The character of many towns and parishes in New-England, where every thing is progressive, and changing, can now be traced with irresistible evidence to its first settlers.”<sup>55</sup> Yet the fact that everything is changing and the town remains the same is precisely the source of the problem.

Naturally, the conclusion that Dwight draws from this fact of inheritance through towns is that “The people of Connecticut are descended from ancestors distinguished for their wisdom and virtue; and owe, under God, to this fact, the prominent features of their

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<sup>54</sup> Dwight I:244

<sup>55</sup> Dwight I:185

character, and the great mass of their blessings.<sup>56</sup> However, even towns founded by good families can be corrupted and those that had spotty ancestry could redeem themselves simply by adhering to the form of the perfect town. New England might hold its identity because the covenant with God holds by heredity no matter what, and the descendents of the puritans can continue to baptize their children into it, or it might change along with its physical circumstances. This is the halfway covenant writ large. In the new ever changing circumstances of New England, the town may no longer hold the secret to producing visible saints or republican citizen.

The towns that he praises most are, not surprisingly, those he associates most with himself. These are Northampton and New Haven. His description of Northampton is riddled with such ambivalence that it is worth examining. Despite Dwight's defense of the town system, and obvious nostalgia for it, he senses its flaws and drawbacks. Even if he could by fiat establish or reestablish the town system in New England, it would not create the new individual required in this changing world. As Peter Kafer suggests, Northampton was highly charged in Dwight's mind as the place that rejected his maternal grandfather, Jonathan Edwards, and sent him to make his living on the frontier, but also as the place where Dwight was raised as the privileged son of a prominent citizen, who was subsequently outcast for declaring British loyalty during the American Revolution.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dwight I:185

<sup>57</sup> Peter Kafer. "The Making of Timothy Dwight a Connecticut Morality Tale" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 47:2 (April 1990), pp. 189-209.

Dwight's description of Northampton highlights the ways in which he connected the individual's development with the town.

The first point that Northampton has in its favor is its history, framed as the biblical settlement of a wilderness. As Dwight recounts the settlement: "Allured by the size, beauty, and fertility of the fine intervals in this region, the first planters passed over the rich county of Worcester, and seated themselves down in a distant solitude filled with savages."<sup>58</sup> The experience of confronting the wilderness, and winning, while dangerous, also credits the character of the initial settlers. They asserted their will over nature. In this case, nature cooperated since "The surface of this township is eminently pleasant. The soil of the town plot is excellent, and, being universally meadow under the highest cultivation, and everywhere interspersed with orchards, makes a most cheerful appearance. There are no more productive grounds in New-England."<sup>59</sup> The site was simply waiting for the intervention of man to perfect it.

Dwight also notes that "Northampton contains 300 houses and is the largest inland town in Massachusetts."<sup>60</sup> Unlike other cities, such as New Haven, Northampton is large but it is decidedly a town, not a city. It has maintained itself because "This town, until the last twenty years, has increased in its numbers very little. From a very early

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<sup>58</sup> Dwight I:238

<sup>59</sup> Dwight I:238

<sup>60</sup> Dwight I:239

period its supernumerary population was employed in colonizing other places.”<sup>61</sup> The town only works up to a certain size.

Northampton has streets arranged “with no very distant resemblance to the claws of a crab; only somewhat less winding and less regular. It has been said, that they were laid out by the cows.”<sup>62</sup> Whether following nature or convenience, this is certainly not a well-ordered town. Yet, “In spite of this irregularity, the town with its scenery is a very interesting object to the eye.”<sup>63</sup> There is something attractive about Northampton’s idiosyncrasy as a town. Nature is at its highest perfection around Northampton. In describing the landscape, Dwight asserts:

The objects by which this town is surrounded are not, within my knowledge, excelled in splendour and beauty...The Lyme range at the distance of thirty miles, forms an assemblage not less delightful than singular; and...Round Hill, the summit of an elevation terminating in the centre of the town, a summit finely regular, crowned with a noble grove, and exhibiting immediately beneath the grove three elegant houses, is inferior to no objects of the same kind in New England.<sup>64</sup>

Northampton is surrounded by sublime nature, especially evidenced in beautiful mountains. After lauding the natural beauty of Northampton, Dwight describes its legacy of fine citizens, among whom were Solomon Stoddard and his descendents, and Jonathan Edwards. Like mountain peaks, these luminaries of theology tower over ordinary citizens. There was something powerful about their minds that could never quite

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<sup>61</sup> Dwight I:247

<sup>62</sup> Dwight I:238

<sup>63</sup> Dwight I:238

<sup>64</sup> Dwight I:239

conform to institutions or popular judgment, as shown by Edwards' removal from the pulpit.

New Haven is much more orderly. However, his description of New Haven is remarkably ambivalent. His standard compliments and superlatives are strangely modified. In his assessment of the character of the town, he states, "The state of society in this town is, I think, remarkably happy. The inhabitants, taken together, are not inferior to those of any town with which I am acquainted, in intelligence, refinement, morals, or religion."<sup>65</sup> This claim is modified by two claims of his own subjective assessment, and the phrases "taken together" and "not inferior" neither of which inspire an overwhelming belief in New Haven's happiness on the part of the reader. Of the people of New Haven, he comments that they "deserve credit for their industry and economy. Almost every man is active in his business, and lives at a prudent distance within his income. Almost all, therefore (with one considerable exception), are in ordinary circumstances thriving."<sup>66</sup> Again, his use of almost and ordinary somewhat mitigate the ostensible sentiment of his statement. Similarly, the commendation "Few places in the world present a fairer example of peace and good order" leaves the reader wondering where the other places are that are more peaceful and better ordered.<sup>67</sup>

New Haven is arranged carefully and logically. "The original town was laid out on the north-western side of the harbour in nine squares, each fifty-two rods on a

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<sup>65</sup> Dwight I:140

<sup>66</sup> Dwight I:139

<sup>67</sup> Dwight I:140



side,...The central square is open, is styled the Green, and is the handsomest ground of this nature which I have seen.<sup>68</sup> It is a perfect example of human order, reason and control over nature. Furthermore, “The views in and around this town are delightful. Scenery does not often strike the eye with more pleasure. A great number of charming rides, in its environs, add not a little to the pleasure of a residence in New-Haven. Take it for all in all, I have never seen the place where I would so willingly spend my life.”<sup>69</sup> Dwight has taken New Haven as his home, and as a place that, thanks to his power at Yale, he had significant influence and ability to shape. Yet it lacks something that Northampton has, especially in its relationship to nature and wilderness. New Haven forces Dwight to recognize that while carefully planned streets and total control over nature are theoretically desirable to create dutiful citizens, there is nothing that can match the splendor of natural genius.

If New Haven is such a perfect town, organized efficiently, and full of the appropriate institutions, then where does Dwight’s lack of enthusiasm come from? He hints at part of the answer when he describes New Haven’s natural state. The soil, for instance, “is dry, warm, and naturally unproductive; but by cultivation is capable of producing every vegetable suited to the climate, and in any quantity.”<sup>70</sup> New Haven was not, to begin with, a beautiful place. Its settlers seem to have done the best with what they had, but it lacks the true perfection that only nature can bring. This points to one of

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<sup>68</sup> Dwight I:131

<sup>69</sup> Dwight I:141

<sup>70</sup> Dwight I:131

the central ambiguities in Dwight's thought. Nature is there to be tamed, but starting out with imperfect nature can never lead to complete perfection. It would be better for New Haven if it had been blessed with incredibly productive soil and pleasant scenery. Just so, the student who is naturally brilliant is somehow better than the student who is not but works hard. One cannot fault New Haven, but neither is one stunned by it. Like his equivocation about the means of grace, Dwight cannot quite reconcile the obvious worth and necessity of human work and improvement, and the uncontrollable, unknowable, but visible sign of God's election.<sup>71</sup>

Another reason for Dwight's attitude is that "New Haven in the legal sense is both a city and a township."<sup>72</sup> Dwight always believes that "the Country is more virtuous than the city."<sup>73</sup> New Haven is simply too large and too commercial to merit his complete approbation. Character had previously been formed in kinship networks. With the inevitable growth of towns came anonymity and itinerancy. While he cannot complain of the general character, he does make an exception:

that of the labourers. By this term I intend that class of men, who look to the earnings of to-day for the subsistence of to-morrow. In New-England almost every man of this character is either shiftless, diseased, or vicious. Employment is found everywhere, and subsistence is abundant, and easily obtained...Every healthy, industrious, prudent man may, therefore, live

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<sup>71</sup> One of Dwight's favorite metaphors concerning the workings of grace was of the farmer planting a crop. The farmer who argues that God can make crops grow if he so wishes, and so sits inside and prays all day is lost, not because God could not do so, but because God works by regular means. The farmer must plant and care for his crop in order to reap the rewards. However, God is still the one behind the crops growing. Thus, the sinner must use all the means of grace, and can be reasonably assured of success, while still recognizing that it is a miracle, completely at God's discretion.

<sup>72</sup> Dwight I:133

<sup>73</sup> Dwight II:17

almost as he wishes, and secure a competence for old age. The local and commercial circumstances of this town have allured to it a large (proportional) number of these men, few of whom are very industrious, fewer economical, and fewer still virtuous.<sup>74</sup>

The fact that New Haven is so successful means that it attracts and creates undesirable citizens. It grows too quickly and its institutions are those of the market. Dwight notes that the town has a market but it suffers from “the want of a regular system.”<sup>75</sup> The natural growth of the town, under the pressure of capitalism, creates disorder. The other blemish on New Haven was the fact that it contained a population of slaves that increased as its size increased. In 1820 New Haven had three percent of the population of Connecticut and eight percent of the black population.<sup>76</sup> The industry and trade that Dwight supports have disastrous consequences when taken to their inevitable end. Yet any other system is inconceivable for Dwight.

The beauty and danger of the New England system, for Dwight is that the town serves the function of providing the proper form for the mind. This functions by the “association of ideas which is so prominent a characteristic of the human mind.” So it is that “a little town, when the seat of government, will always impart its littleness to the Legislature, and to all its coadjutors. Every thing must here exist on a very limited scale.”

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<sup>74</sup> Dwight I:139

<sup>75</sup> Dwight I:139

<sup>76</sup> Robert Austin Warner *The New Haven Negroes: A Social History* New York, Arno Press, 1989,

This limits the human mind such that it directs its energies to objects that are “confined, and degrading.”<sup>77</sup>

Dwight idealizes the New England town system, but in practice, he notices that it is either destroyed by the very industry and improvement that are its basic values, or it limits the potential of the human mind. Since the town alone cannot be the answer to change, Dwight considers New England’s other unique asset: the wilderness.

### *III: The Wilderness*

The wilderness was both a source of concern for Dwight and a source of hope.<sup>78</sup> Like his understanding of the town, Dwight’s understanding of the influence of the wilderness on New England presupposes environmentalism. Yet in the *Travels* Dwight transcends a simple Enlightenment environmentalism and considers the more complicated contributions of the wilderness to New England life.

Why is Dwight so concerned about the wilderness, when by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most of the places he visits are definitely within the bounds of civilization? The theme of the wilderness ran strongly in the Puritan imagination. New England was the Wilderness

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<sup>77</sup> Dwight II:304

<sup>78</sup> The classic text on the wilderness is Roderick Nash *Wilderness and the American Mind* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. Nash made it clear that the wilderness was not a static entity but an idea that changed over time and was used in many ways in American culture. A recent survey of the state of the field can be found in Michael Lewis *American Wilderness: A New History* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. For specifically Puritan views of the wilderness, see John Canup, *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of an American Identity in Colonial New England*.

into which God cast his chosen as a trial. From it they were to create the garden. Despite its religious necessity, the wilderness was a place of fear and trial. The wilderness was only a stage on the way to the Promised Land. Roderick Nash argues that “[p]aradoxically, one sought the wilderness as a way of being purified, and hence delivered from it into a paradisiacal promised land. There was no fondness in the Hebraic tradition for wilderness itself.”<sup>79</sup> True to his heritage, when he recounts the history of towns and New England itself, Dwight keeps the standard rhetoric of the howling wilderness. He enthusiastically praises the accomplishments of the settlers who conquered the wilds and turned them into settlements while bemoaning how difficult the wilderness made this task. In Dwight’s mind, the wilderness still signified physical danger, spiritual decay, and social disorder, but it signified other more positive things as well. The untouched wilderness is one of the few assets America can display against European detractors. The beauty of nature at least “may compensate the want of ancient castles, ruined abbeys, and fine pictures.”<sup>80</sup> In this, Dwight is deeply engaged in defending America against the detractions of Europeans.<sup>81</sup> He fully admits that America has no monuments but it has fresh wilderness. Since the wilderness helps differentiate America from Europe, America’s virtue, in some way, lies in its wilderness.

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<sup>79</sup> Nash 16

<sup>80</sup> Dwight I:8

<sup>81</sup> See Antonello Gerbi *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973 and Thomas Murphy *A Land Without Castles: The Changing Image of America in Europe 1780-1830* Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2001.

Dwight does not encounter any remote and wild areas on his journeys; no frontier in Frederick Jackson Turner's sense. What counts as Wilderness is more a state of mind, a spiritual wilderness. To Dwight's regenerate eyes, any place that is not in sight of a town or cultivation is wilderness.

More importantly, Dwight begins to recognize that the wilderness is not merely a place of danger and a metaphor for spiritual disaster. Rather, in the changing climate of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the wilderness offers a positive alternative to the moral decay of the city. Dwight cannot fully articulate this sentiment, resulting in a mix of traditional Puritan rhetoric and proto-environmental and romantic discourses. After all, Dwight was devoted to Edwards' theology. The same Edwards who wrote both of the religious affections and of natural philosophy and spiders. In the *Travels*, study of the natural world comes close to being a means of grace comparable to studying the Bible.

Previously, the wilderness held only potential corruption for the New England mind, a descent into sin, savagery, or even madness. As Dwight gazes onto the wilderness, he sees its potential for regenerating the mind and spirit. Not only is the wilderness essential to the identity of America itself, but it is also essential to the identity of the individual. Dwight cannot conceptualize the vision of Emerson and Thoreau. Nevertheless, he sees that the idea of the self-regulated by the social institutions of the town can no longer hold, and that the self-developed by the city is inimical to everything he holds dear.

Dwight's observations in the *Travels* break down political antagonism.

Dwight comes very close to Jefferson's position in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, despite Dwight's consistent and outspoken hatred for Jefferson. Both defend America against Europe. They praise the beauty, healthfulness, vigor of American nature. Attempting to disprove Buffon, they provide examples of the size and fruitfulness of American fauna. Both prefer the farmer over the city dweller.

The first volume of Dwight's work is devoted to defending American nature against its detractors. He rejects the idea, which he associates most with George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, that American animals are inferior and degenerated from European animals.<sup>82</sup> He asserts that "America is much more favorable to the growth of animals than Europe....What if we should turn the tables on you and insist that your continent is grown too old to yield the productions of nature in their full size, while ours, young, if you please, certainly vigorous, nourishes them to a state of comparative perfection."<sup>83</sup> While in other sections he plays up the danger of wild animals as one of the threats that the original colonists had to deal with, he also claims, "there are fewer noxious animals of any kind in New- England, than in most countries on the Eastern

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<sup>82</sup> Buffon suggested that forces of nature shape species. His theories were largely based on reproduction, which is how species were defined, and was the important force of nature. The new world was weak because its inhabitants lacked sex drive. Dwight vigorously contested this view. For more on the race theory that Dwight was familiar with see, Thomas F. Gossett *Race: the History of an Idea in America* New Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; and Bruce R. Dain *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. Both are useful in understanding Dwight's arguments with Buffon and other 18<sup>th</sup> Century naturalists.

<sup>83</sup> Dwight I:33

continent.”<sup>84</sup> Even as he lists the annoying pests that damage crops, he adds the caveat that “Notwithstanding the ravages of all these enemies, it is probable that no country abounds more in the food of man, and animals, than New-England.”<sup>85</sup> In spite of the high death rate of the original colonists, Dwight announces: “New England is the healthiest country in the United States; and probably inferiour in this respect to few in the world.”<sup>86</sup> From a Puritan distrust of the wilderness, Dwight has moved to exalting the salutary aspects of the New England environment.

Dwight chafes at the accusation of the British that “we are destined, it seems, to a savageness less remediable and more absolutely hopeless; a savageness derived, not only from the state of society, but also from circumstances of an external nature”.<sup>87</sup> According to the British version of environmentalism, Americans’ contact with the wilderness means that the men are “either partially or wholly Indians” and the “women must of course be squaws.”<sup>88</sup> Following the fallacious reasoning of foreign commentators, Dwight sarcastically concludes, “the cause of this great national calamity must undoubtedly be sought for in our hills and vallies, our plains and mountains, our lakes and rivers.”<sup>89</sup> Noting that this transformation of Americans into savages has not occurred, Dwight argues that rather than degrade humanity, in his experience, nature

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<sup>84</sup> Dwight I:57

<sup>85</sup> Dwight I:53

<sup>86</sup> Dwight I:58

<sup>87</sup> Dwight IV:332

<sup>88</sup> Dwight IV:332

<sup>89</sup> Dwight IV:332



elicits ideas of “pre-eminent beauty, magnificence, and splendor” and awakens sentiments of “amazing grandeur and singular elevation.”<sup>90</sup> Dwight does not dispute that the environment can have an effect on the mind and character of New England. Instead, he argues that since civilization has thus far prospered, the wilderness must have a beneficial influence. It is all a matter of context.

Dwight makes a final argument against the deleterious effects of wilderness on the mind. He vociferously denies that climate can be the sole cause of change in man, especially mental change. If that were so, he argues, Italy would still be the source of geniuses. He suggests instead that God assigns genius as he sees fit, and that, if indeed some natural law governs genius, that it is the law of inheritance, in which case America should have more than her share. He seems not to notice that this belies the rest of his book, which, although less explicitly, constantly makes the argument that climate, physical and psychical, has a real effect on people.

He holds a fear of wilderness that blends with his admiration of the beauty of the pastoral and his dislike of over-cultivation. This is more than just the change in aesthetic sensibilities, although it was a parallel development. Nash characterizes the situations as: “Wilderness and civilization become antipodal influences which combine in varying proportions to determine the character of an area. In the middle portions of the spectrum is the rural or pastoral environment (the ploughed) that represents a balance of the forces

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<sup>90</sup> Dwight IV:333

of nature and man.”<sup>91</sup> If Dwight were searching merely for order, he would praise only the pastoral, as he did in his earlier writings. However, by the time of the *Travels* Dwight can no longer contemplate such a simple solution.

Therefore, while Dwight’s fear of the frontier might logically lead him to be a proponent of transforming all wildernesses into human settlement, his understanding that American identity relies on the wilderness and what it symbolizes prevents him from such a conclusion. Commenting on the fact that European visitors often object to the heavy forestation of America, Dwight writes, “My own taste and wishes are directly opposed to theirs, for in our ancient settlements I never see a grove cut down, nor a forest converted into fields without regret.”<sup>92</sup> These improvements recapitulate the classic Puritan crisis, as the hard work of the first generation led to the economic obsessions of the second generation and signs of grace outstripped actual conversion. As the community grows through practicing values of industry and diligence, the resulting luxuries undermine the values that founded the community in the first place. As men “improve” the landscape around them, Dwight notes that it is often not an improvement, but a harm.

If Dwight finds something promising about the wilderness, it is its ability to refresh, to correct the corruption of the city, and to spark the imagination. He waxes lyrical about the beauty that surrounds him as he travels. He is especially verbose about

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<sup>91</sup> Nash 6

<sup>92</sup> Dwight III:91.

mountains and their “misty grandeur, partly embosomed and partly capped by clouds”<sup>93</sup> This beauty makes a mountain “a highly sublime object.”<sup>94</sup> Traveling through the Connecticut wilderness from a waterfall a traveler can find “one of the richest tracts, and is presented with one of the most romantic and delightful scenes, alternately beautiful and sublime, which can be found in this country, perhaps in the world.”<sup>95</sup> Such scene provided both “wild and fantastical forms” for the mind to work on, and provided Dwight what “seemed to be the connecting link between the earth and the heavens.”<sup>96</sup> As Dwight looks upon a waterfall, he wonders what it might look like in the spring, and writes that the idea “appeared to my fancy superiour to any thing, which I had seen or read, of the wild and awful majesty of nature, except the ravages of a volcano.”<sup>97</sup>

While towns bring Dwight pleasure and peace, none can arouse the feelings that he records traveling on a plain, which deceives him into thinking “that it is the commencement of a settled country; and, as he advances towards it, is instinctively led to cast his eye forward, to find the town or village, of which it is the outskirt.”<sup>98</sup> Although he is in the “heart of an immense wilderness”, he feels not fear, but calm.<sup>99</sup> Indeed “a sense of stillness and solitude, a feeling of absolute retirement from the world, deeper and more affecting than any which he has ever suspected before, will be forced upon him,

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<sup>93</sup> Dwight II:261

<sup>94</sup> Dwight II:261

<sup>95</sup> Dwight III:278

<sup>96</sup> Dwight II:107

<sup>97</sup> Dwight II:206

<sup>98</sup> Dwight IV:37

<sup>99</sup> Dwight IV:37

while he is roving over one of these sequestered regions. No passage out of them is presented to his eye.”<sup>100</sup> This is not quite the harmonious environment of the town. Impressions are forced upon Dwight, and there is no obvious way out. Yet even in the midst of this solitude, Dwight expects to see a town just over the horizon. The wilderness takes him out of time, but he moves into a space in which the town and the wilderness are intimately connected.

Nevertheless, Dwight does not find this solitude to be threatening, as he often describes solitude to be to character. Indeed, the scene places Dwight “in a kind of wild, romantic rapture” as if the scene before him is from a book or “imaginary regions spread before him in a dream.”<sup>101</sup> That the experience stirs his imagination and not his reason is important. The wilderness does what the town cannot. It expands the mind rather than constrict it.

Dwight is at the same time wary of the self-obsession that solitude imposes on people. It is after all the solitary nature of frontier life that deranges their minds. However, he is also well aware that scenes that stir the affections are also part of God’s creation. Steeped in a long tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment and his grandfather’s theology, Dwight believes that every part of the mind has a useful purpose.<sup>102</sup> A properly prepared mind would be elevated, not deranged. As a saved man, Dwight can be assured

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<sup>100</sup> Dwight IV:37

<sup>101</sup> Dwight IV:38

<sup>102</sup> See Fitzmier, 82-89 for Dwight’s connection to the Scottish Enlightenment and Jonathan Edwards *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007.

to have “a new spiritual sense that the mind has; or a principle of a new kind of perception or spiritual sensation, which in its whole nature different from any former kinds of sensation of the mind.”<sup>103</sup>

While Dwight knows that towns are best for ordering the reasoning parts of the mind and restraining unruly passions, the scene on the prairie excites other faculties of his mind that bring him closer to individual genius and divine beauty. The solitude that this scene imposes upon Dwight is such that:

He is not only separated from all human beings, but is every moment conscious of this separation. Whenever he ascends one of the superior elevations, he seems to stand above the rest of the globe. On every side he looks downward, and beholds a prospect, with many vistas opening indeed around him, but conducting his eye to no definite object, and losing it in confusion and obscurity. His view is confined neither by forests nor mountains; while yet trees, in a thin dispersion, partially interrupt it; but at the same time discover, through their various openings, that it has no other limitation than the skirts of the heavens.<sup>104</sup>

Here Dwight finds himself with just himself. His eye has no object, and his mind only that of himself and of the heavens. In contrast with the strict bounding of the towns, “Yet though the tract around him is seemingly bounded everywhere, the boundary is everywhere obscure.”<sup>105</sup> Instead of careful order, the traveler finds that “On every side a multitude of chasms conduct his eye beyond the labyrinth, by which he is surrounded; and present an imaginary passage back into the world, from which he is withdrawn.”<sup>106</sup>

The scene separates him from the world, with no real way back. The scenery sparks his

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<sup>103</sup> Edwards 137

<sup>104</sup> Dwight IV:38

<sup>105</sup> Dwight IV:37

<sup>106</sup> Dwight IV:37

imagination, a faculty that has no real value in a town, and in fact can be destructive, but one that Dwight knows is essential. It excites the imagination so much that the traveler forgets who he is. He “cannot fail to remember, that on these plains Indians have lived, and roved, and hunted, and fought, ever since their first arrival from the shores of Asia. Here, unless they molested each other, there was nothing to molest them. They were the sole lords, the undisturbed possessors of the country.”<sup>107</sup> Yet he also comments that the Indians are barbarous and warlike. It takes the viewer out of his own time and place, back to a time when cities did not exist. Even the staid Dwight admits that “Whether these thoughts will be excited in the mind of any future traveler I know not; in my own, they sprang up instinctively.”<sup>108</sup>

This combination of solitude, boundlessness, chaos, imagination and Indians provides something that a town cannot. Instead of providing what Dwight terms “good motivations” for action, as the towns do, this scene provides no motivation to action at all. Indeed, the scene acts on Dwight by “bewildering him with expectation, continually awakened, to be continually disappointed.” He is not motivated, or pushed toward any object at all, least of all a useful one. Instead, he is confused. However, this does not seem unpleasant to Dwight. In his more didactic paragraphs, he rails against the appeal of experiences such as these, but when he experiences them himself, he cannot help but

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<sup>107</sup> Dwight IV:37-38

<sup>108</sup> Dwight IV:37-38

recognize their appeal, and indeed, their necessity. This experience is only available, of course to those properly prepared by grace.

While this paragraph is unusual for Dwight in its blatant personal nature and subjectivity, it is not out of step with his other observations about the wilderness. Even a contemporaneous source notes that Dwight “excels in picturesque descriptions of the scenery of nature—the gaiety and sweetness of rural prospects and the wild and romantic magnificence of our mountains, lakes and cataracts. He viewed with enthusiasm the sublime and beautiful in landscape and paints them with the glowing colors of a poetical imagination.”<sup>109</sup> The same review notes that Dwight's other descriptions and lectures on good character and good action, while laudable, could also easily be seen as “dull and tedious.”<sup>110</sup> Dwight’s strength lies in his imagination and his poetry. New England’s future lies in that direction too.

Jefferson describes a similar moment. He describes visiting the Natural Bridge: “Though the sides of this bridge are provided in some parts with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute gave me a violent headache.”<sup>111</sup> Taking Dwight’s understanding of the regenerate to the extreme it makes sense that Jefferson gets a

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<sup>109</sup> “Review of New Publications” *Christian Spectator* (1819-1828); Mar 1, 1822; 4, 3; American Periodicals Series Online 150

<sup>110</sup> “Review of New Publications” *Christian Spectator* (1819-1828); Mar 1, 1822; 4, 3; American Periodicals Series Online 145

<sup>111</sup> Jefferson, 23.

headache. Dwight is able to appreciate nature because he does not experience it in the same way that Jefferson does. God's grace touches Dwight and permits him to experience something transcendent. While their language seems the same, they are describing very different interactions, Jefferson's secular and Dwight's sacred.

The impact of the wilderness on the mind is definite on the saved mind. Dwight notes that "In these wild and elevated regions the fancy of the philosopher is much more awake, than his intellect. The suggestions of his mind, the very arguments which he uses, and the conclusions on which he fastens, instead of being the sound emanations of logic, are mere effusions of poetry; and need nothing to complete this character, except to be written in verse."<sup>112</sup> While this takes the form of an attack on poetry, it must be remembered that Dwight himself was a poet, an avocation to which he was deeply devoted. While his aspirations to literature as a life's work were always obstructed, he did not consider a poet's work less important than the philosopher's. Without a little wilderness, America will have nothing unique. Without imagination, passion, and genius, American society will stagnate. Without scenes of awesome wildness, solitude, and boundless, the mind is likely to suffer, and perhaps even lose the capacity for poetry. Properly understood and experienced, the wilderness could supply the deficiencies of the town, and correct the corruption of the city.

#### *IV: The Indians*

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<sup>112</sup> Dwight II:301



If the wilderness can be useful, then how is Dwight to understand the people with constant exposure to it: the Indians? They were the original Americans. Do they provide a way to stop Americans from becoming like Europeans? Like Jefferson, Dwight has to defend against attacks that claim that the degeneracy of the Indians is indicative of the inferiority of the American environment. At the same time, his Puritan heritage requires him to portray the Indians as dangerous, barbarous savages. The Indians must be for Dwight both promising and cautionary. Their unmitigated exposure to the physical environment has shaped them so that they embody the qualities of the wilderness, good and bad. Having no way to moderate or shape these qualities, the Indians exist in an undesirable state. As natural men they are the poorest prepared to encounter God in nature.

By the time Dwight wrote the *Travels* moderate praise of the Indians were common. Jefferson too describes the Indians as natural men, lacking the influence of civilization. "Their only controls are their manners, and that moral sense of right and wrong which, like the sense of tasting and feeling, in every man makes a part of his nature. An offence against these is punished by contempt, by exclusion from society, or, where the case is serious, as that of murder, by the individuals whom it concerns. Imperfect as this species of coercion may seem, crimes are very rare among them."<sup>113</sup>

Jill Lepore argues that during King Phillip's war the colonists constructed their identity against that of the Indians, who represented everything savage and degenerate.

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<sup>113</sup> Jefferson, 100.

Even praying Indians posed a threat because they blurred the boundaries between English and Indian. In the centuries after the war, Americans associated themselves with the Indian, developing an American identity distinct from their English heritage. In the play *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* King Philip himself became a noble savage who tragically resisted English tyranny.

This ambivalence in Dwight is akin to America's complicated relationship to the savage. Deloria describes how Americans "inclined to see themselves in opposition to England rather than to Indians,...inverted interior and exterior to imagine a new boundary line of national identity. They began to transform exterior, noble savage Others into symbolic figures that could be rhetorically interior to the society they sought to inaugurate. In short, the ground of the opposition shifted and, with them, national self-definitions. As England became a them for colonists, Indians became an us. This inversion carried extraordinary consequences for subsequent American politics and identity."<sup>114</sup> Dwight is confronting what happens when the wilderness and the savage becomes part of the American identity.

Yet Dwight does not treat the Indians exactly the same way that his contemporaries were beginning to. William Cullen Bryant's poem "An Indian at the Burial-Place of his Father" shares some of Dwight's rhetoric. The speaker regrets the cultivation that has ruined the nature that he loves:

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<sup>114</sup> Philip Deloria. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 22.

A white man, gazing on the scene  
 Would say a lovely spot was here,  
 And praise the lawns, so fresh and green,  
 Between the hills so sheer.  
 I like it not--I would the plain  
 Lay in its tall old groves again.<sup>115</sup>

However, for Dwight, the Indian is the last person able to discern good cultivation from deleterious interference with the environment. The Indian lacks the proper sight and understanding. Philip Freneau presents a similar scene in “The Indian Burying Ground”. The speaker imagines the ghosts of the Indians:

And long shall timorous Fancy see  
 The painted chief, and pointed spear,  
 And Reason's self shall bow the knee  
 To shadows and delusions here.<sup>116</sup>

In contrast, Dwight does not regret the lost past of the Indians, nor does he envy their lifestyle or savageness. His goal is not to identify Americans with the nobility of the Indians against the British. Rather, he wishes to understand the influence of America's environment on people, to understand what sort of character it creates.

His contemplation of the Indians depends on his observation that “The ordinary course of Providence, operating agreeably to natural and established laws, has wrought the change here. A similar course of Providence is therefore justly concluded to have wrought the change from white to red, and to black; or, what is perhaps more probable,

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<sup>115</sup> William Cullen Bryant “An Indian at the Burial-Place of his Fathers” (1824) *Poems* Fourth ed. New York: Harper, 1836. 214

<sup>116</sup> Philip Freneau “The Indian Burying Ground” (1787) *The Poems of Philip Freneau: Poet of the American Revolution* vol. II Princeton: C.S. Robinson, 1902. 369

from red to white on the one hand, and from red to black on the other.”<sup>117</sup>

Thus people can change between colors depending on circumstance.

Dwight knows that “the children of Americans, Englishmen, Scotchmen, Irishmen, Dutchmen, and Frenchmen, when captivated by them in early life, become mere Indians, distinguishable in nothing, except a small difference of colour, from the native savages.”<sup>118</sup> As easily as the black become white in America, the white man can become red. However, now that civilization has been established in New England, it is much more likely that Indians will be converted to Americans than the other way around.

Dwight gives examples of Indians living in a civilized sort of town, and then recounts second-hand examples of these Indians turning white. Their town is not nearly as perfect as that of whites, but Dwight deems them as good as the nearby Dutch populations. They turn white, not as some sort of accident, but as a direct result of their altering their lifestyle and society.

Dwight’s praise of the Indians, and wilderness in general, is rooted in his understanding of the passions. His attraction suggests that he goes beyond Edwards’ reasoned acceptance of the passions towards a desire for the unstructured romantic life that a submission to the passions promises. In the history dominated sections of the *Travels*, Dwight recounts the standard story of the horrors of King Philip’s war, of the

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<sup>117</sup> Dwight III:129

<sup>118</sup> Dwight III:16

inhumanity of the Indians and the impossibility of reasoning with them.

Contemplating the Indians he thinks of “the secret windings of the scout, the burst of the war-whoop, the fury of an Indian onset, the triumphant display of scalps, and the horrors of the war-dance before the tortured and expiring captive.”<sup>119</sup> However, when he comes to characterize the Indians he finds things to praise. That the natural stock of America is superior to some European stock is obvious because “the Canadian descendants of the French peasantry are many of them inferior in every respect to the aborigines” especially “Miantonimoh, Philip, Sassacus, Uncas, or the great Hendrick.”<sup>120</sup> While in general the Indians’ eyes had “a vacant look when unimpassioned,” they “possessed a natural understanding, sagacity, and wit, equal to the same attributes in other men.”<sup>121</sup>

These natural understandings need only God’s grace to improve them. What was lacking for the Indians were the proper motivations to encourage them to join civilization and convert. As he notes of the Indians “The great calamity experienced by these Indians, and by all other people in the like circumstances, is this: within the horizon of their thought not a single motive arises, not a single inducement is visible, which might awaken their dozing energy or prompt them to any useful effort. Man, without motives to exertion, is a beast or a log; with them, he can become an Alfred or a Paul.”<sup>122</sup>

Furthermore, “The great hindrance to their improvement does not lie, as some dreaming

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<sup>119</sup> Dwight IV:37-38

<sup>120</sup> Dwight III:17

<sup>121</sup> Dwight I:79

<sup>122</sup> Dwight III:16

European philosophers have supposed, in the inferiority of their minds. Their minds are natively of the same structure with those of Frenchmen or Englishmen.”<sup>123</sup> It is simply a matter of education and influence.

Dwight refutes Buffon’s idea that the cause of the degeneration is the lack of generative power since “The real cause of all this degradation in the Indian is the want of such motives to exertion as he is prepared to feel within the view of his mind.”<sup>124</sup> This excuses American nature from fault. The Indians are not uncivilized because of some fault in America, but rather because they lack the motivation and the ability to appreciate the nature around them because they are not saved. Even so, their contact with the wilderness, the book of nature, does grant them certain qualities.

These qualities hint at what Americans will lose if they cut off contact with the wilderness and increase their contact with cities. Like the wilderness the Indians’ minds were “were exactly what nature, cherished by regular and unlimited indulgence, made them. Uncontrolled by their parents during their childhood and youth, except in those cases only, where necessity forbade this indulgence, they were impatient of control ever after, where it was not absolutely demanded by either personal or public safety.”<sup>125</sup> The lack of control might prohibit Indians from existing in New England style towns, but it had more subtle advantages. Indians had freedom and unlimited imagination. Dwight concludes that “their gratitude and probably all the gentle affections which they exercise,

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<sup>123</sup> Dwight III:17

<sup>124</sup> Dwight III: 17

<sup>125</sup> Dwight I:79

are like their resentments, not only lasting but conveyed through several successive generations.”<sup>126</sup> As evidence, he tells a story in which a travelling Indian cannot pay for a meal, and cannot get credit at the inn. A fellow traveler pays for him. After making a joke about the cruelty of the woman running the inn, the Indian promises to repay the debt. Several years later, the Indian frees the traveler when he was captured by Indians, though the traveler had completely forgotten him. Rightly ordered by God’s grace, these affections are essential in the visible saint.

Dwight’s description of the governance of the Iroquois is also sympathetic. Their leadership was lacked the political corruption that so concerned Dwight in his own culture. “Influence in the tribe was always that of merit; the man of the greatest talents and efficiency being the most powerful man, whatever might be the family from which he derived his origin.”<sup>127</sup> Being a mostly peaceable people, “They never quarrelled with each other, unless when they were intoxicated.”<sup>128</sup> Besides drunkenness, they seemed to have few crimes, no theft, assault, or rape. While he mildly criticizes the division of labor between men and women, he also notes the relative equality in their relationships.

### *Conclusion*

As Eva Kornfeld points out, an important facet of American identity the projection of all negative qualities on a single group defined as Other. “Yet this sense of

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<sup>126</sup> Dwight I:81

<sup>127</sup> Dwight IV:137

<sup>128</sup> Dwight IV:137

permanence and immutability is illusory. The categories of identity are not given, but constituted through learned and popular discourses of encounter. A central role in the process of “othering” belongs to narrative, or the stories that people tell about themselves and others. Even material issues between the self and the Other are shaped by narrative.”<sup>129</sup> The *Travels* is in part an attempt to renegotiate this relationship. In a world that is rapidly changing, when the old forms become unstable and impractical, Dwight attempts to reimagine New England’s relationship to the wilderness and to the Indians in order to balance the decline of the towns and the rise of the city. The new American is not a European, nor is he the Indian. Rather, he is able to take advantage of the promise offered by the American wilderness. However, this is only possible in the context of spiritual regeneration accomplished through traditional means.

It is impossible for Dwight to explicitly articulate a new position since it threatens his heritage, his religion, his social position, and his identity itself. On the one hand he wants identity to be something that is attached to the past, and made by heritage and parentage, but at the same time he want them to be flexible, ever renewing, and interesting, shaped by ourselves. He desires the insularity and safety of an institutionally controlled self and the thrill and possibility of an unconstrained one. It is impossible to hold this condition. New England cannot be a collection of villages and be constantly

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<sup>129</sup> Eve Kornfeld. *Creating an American Culture, 1775-1800: A Brief History with Documents*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001, 66.



growing. It cannot hold to a careful and safe mediocrity and still expect genius.

The restrictions of the town no longer make sense in the attempt to create the citizen.

Previous commentators have concentrated on Dwight's adherence to the Republican or Puritan corporate model of organization. They see him as essentially, conservative, trying to hold to a vision that does not exist. For instance, Timothy Spears argues that "As Dwight stood on the margins of civilization and hopefully searched the landscape for the unmistakable signs of the harmonizing New England way, he believed that America's destiny depended on the common observations of all its citizens."<sup>130</sup> I would argue that he believed just the opposite. While he is devoted to harmony, he searches for individuality and beauty. While he is devoted to common beliefs, his work is based on his own subjective observations, and the subjective superiority of New England.

Looking towards the prospect that "The American States will soon be dissevered and will then form separate empires" Dwight shows little fear or regret. The dissolution of the union might mean that "the era of peace and prosperity to the human race may be more distant than [he] had imagined."<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, it might not be a bad thing for New England. It was clear to Dwight that "The limited powers of the human mind seem, hitherto, to have been incompetent to direct with success the internal affairs of a great empire, so as to secure to its inhabitants that degree of happiness, which has been realized

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<sup>130</sup> Timothy B. Spears "Common Observations: Timothy Dwight's Travels in New England and New York." *American Studies* 30.1 (1989): 35-52.49

<sup>131</sup> Dwight IV:372

in states of a moderate extent.”<sup>132</sup> Conversely, smaller states both are more manageable by the limited human mind, and provide the form and limits that better shape the human mind toward happiness. “Should these hereafter take place, New England and New-York will, almost of course, be united in the same political body.”<sup>133</sup> Far from suffering from this situation “there cannot be a doubt, that their citizens will hereafter find, in their local situation, soil, and climate; in their religious and political systems; in their arts, literature and science; in their manners and morals ; in their health, energy, and activity; ample, perhaps peculiar, sources of national greatness and prosperity.”<sup>134</sup> Perhaps, if New England were separate and self-governing, there might be a chance for it to cultivate and preserve the balance between town and wilderness that Dwight cannot even articulate clearly because it seems so contrary to a proper state of society. There is of course a sense of nostalgia to the *Travels* but it is nostalgia for a New England that never really existed. The only solution Dwight can advocate involves reenergizing those institutions that New England is famous for, but strengthening them in the context of the disappearance of the frontier and growth of civilization would only serve to overdetermine the self to such a degree that individuality might cease to exist. At the same time, while the wilderness offers expansive solitude and intensity of feeling, total immersion in it might also result in the dissolution of the self. A middle ground is alluring but impossible to coherently conceptualize. In this way the *Travels* anticipates

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<sup>132</sup> Dwight IV:373

<sup>133</sup> Dwight IV:373

<sup>134</sup> Dwight IV:373

more than a move from Puritanism to American Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Dwight's anxiety is closer to that experienced at the end of the century when Americans tried to interpret the closing of the frontier as it affected its identity. Ultimately, Dwight gives up on the question of individual identity, at least in the *Travels*. His longings for romantic freedom, for himself and New England, are impossible within the bounds of a universe constrained either by heredity or environment. The solution lies, as it always did, in the transformative power of God's grace. Only in that way can town and the wilderness be properly understood and used, and only with that is the only way that Americans create a republic that resists European decadence and that can adapt to change without collapsing into degeneracy.

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